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ABSTRACT

This study identified differences and similarities among the perceptions of adult and adolescent community members regarding drug use patterns and practices. A written questionnaire was administered to 5,128 adolescents from grades 7 through 12 in the rural inland northwest, and a similar questionnaire was administered to over 900 adults in the same communities. The questionnaires assessed reported alcohol, tobacco, and other drug usage; selected demographic information; perceptions of community drug use patterns; and knowledge about drugs. The arena for average first experimentation with alcohol moved from high school to sixth grade; for average first intoxication from 12th grade to 8th grade; for regular use from post-high school to 9th grade; and for experimentation/intoxication/regular use of other drugs from 12th grade to 9th grade, all in a single generation. In every case, the ease with which adults perceived that students could obtain the respective substance was much greater than that perceived by the students themselves. Student and adult perceptions of adult use of alcohol showed uniform levels of agreement; however, student and adult perceptions of adult use of marijuana, cocaine and pills did reveal significant differences. Significant differences between adult and student perceptions of student use of drugs were also found. Student and adult knowledge levels of alcohol and other drugs were not significantly different; however, adult knowledge of alcohol was superior to that of the students, and student knowledge of other drugs was superior to that of the adults. (LLL)

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Adult and Adolescent Perceptions of Their Community's Drug Use Patterns

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Abstract

Despite the stepping down of the U.S. Drug Czar the issue of drug abuse in the United States is an important and critical one today. Community members are focussing time and effort on reducing the problems in their schools, their places of employment, and throughout their communities. The purpose of this study was to identify differences and similarities among the perceptions of adult and adolescent community members regarding drug use patterns and practices. A large written questionnaire was administered to a sample of 5128 adolescents from grades 7 through 12 in the rural inland northwest and a similar questionnaire was administered to over 900 adults in the same communities. The questionnaires assessed reported alcohol, tobacco, and other drug usage, selected demographic information, perceptions of community drug use patterns, and knowledge about drugs. Numerous similarities were identified between the adolescent and adult samples regarding use patterns and perceptions. In addition, numerous significant differences were also found between these two groups on reported use levels, perceptions of use in the community, and knowledge about drugs and their effects.

Introduction

In the early days of the Drug Education Infusion Project (1988), as staff sought adult support for school- and community-based drug education prevention efforts, they encountered expressed feelings of powerlessness, anomie, etc. by adults related to their self-perceived credibility as sources of drug education information and as origins/referents for their own children's actions related to drug/alcohol use. The feeling was so often expressed that it became a source of amazement to staff members.

Subsequently, project staff completed a study (Mayton et al, 1990) which clearly demonstrated that adult perceptions were inaccurate. Students perceived parents, teachers, and other adults to be the most well informed and credible sources about drugs; yet those groups continued to hold the perception of powerlessness related to their ability to influence students' use levels, experimentation patterns, and/or use frequencies of various drugs.

The purpose of the current study was to further investigate various issues and facets of adult and student perceptions of drug use, drug knowledge, and drug use patterns and effects. Specifically, the study sought to identify similarities and differences in self- and other perceptions between adults and students. Following the experiences and findings of project staff in the 1990 study, it seemed logical that the efficacy and effectiveness of school- and/or community-based drug use prevention and education efforts could be negatively and tragically affected

by inaccurate cross perceptions (student/adult; adult/student) related to use patterns, knowledge of, and attitudes toward drug/alcohol use.

Related Studies

An examination of previous studies which investigated relationships between adults' attitudes, knowledge, use patterns, and values related to alcohol/drugs and the effects/influences of those upon similar variables in adolescents/youth, supported the importance and relevance of the current study. Research results from several types of studies, having varied focal points and designs, supported the relevance of this line of thought and investigation.

Claster (1982), in a survey of 335 Brooklyn adults whose households included school-aged children, reported a) the central importance of drug use as a critical societal problem, b) adult perceived pervasive use of all types of drugs by adolescents, c) adult personal observation as the dominant source of opinions, d) relatively low perceived knowledge of effects of drug and alcohol, and e) low knowledge levels about existing drug education/drug use prevention efforts in the community. The perception of drug use is a critical problem coupled with perceived lack of knowledge clearly emerged in this study.

Students, who self-reported levels of drug use, were found to be more likely to have parents who used drugs, or who held

permissive views about drug use, in a 1984 study by McDermott. Johnson et al (1984) reported moderate, roughly equivalent, parallel relationships between parental and adolescent use of the same drugs. In addition, parental use of marijuana was strongly related to adolescent use of harder drugs.

Blount and Dembo (1984) reported that users and non-users, respectively, of drugs/alcohol in an inner city junior high school comprised separate subcultures differentiated by attitudes, behaviors, identified peer referent groups, and identified significant adults. In a statewide California study, Skager et al (1986) reported significant effects upon adolescent drug use for a) perceived use levels of referent adults, b) perceived attitudes of referent adults toward drug use, and c) perceived adult knowledge levels about drugs.

Halebsky's (1987) findings suggested that adolescent substance use results, in part, from modeling and imitation. Increased adolescent use was correlated with parent use and perceived parental attitude toward illicit drug use. The role of adults as role models, relative to specific substance non-use in a study of self-reported use by adolescents, along with the importance of amount of information, self-concept and alternative activity participation was reported by Grimes and Swisher (1989).

In summary, studies of adult perceptions, attitudes, knowledge and use patterns related to drugs have exposed their effects upon student use of and perceptions about drugs and alcohol. Further,

student perceptions have evidenced correlations with perceived adult use of and attitudes toward illicit drugs.

Method

Responses on common items between two instruments; one administered to students and one to adults, were the focus of analysis in this study. The student sample included 5,128 adolescents in grades 7-12 in the rural inland northwest. The adult sample included 900+ adults from the same communities.

The items in common for the adult and student samples included; a) 10 items on 5 levels of frequency of self reported use of alcohol, tobacco and 7 other drugs (marijuana, cocaine, pills, PCP, etc.), b) reported age of first use, intoxication, multiple drug use, c) ease of students obtaining alcohol and 5 other drugs, d) adult/student perception of the proportion-by-frequency-of-use patterns of themselves and the other group for alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and other drugs, e) adult/student perceptions of teachers' proportion-by-frequency-of-use patterns, and f) 12 true/false items designed to test knowledge about alcohol and drugs and their effects.

Response patterns on the foregoing sets of items were examined using Chi-Square and Fisher's Exact Probability statistics. Evaluation for significant differences between responses of adults and students employed two-tailed tests with alpha = .05.

Findings

The average age of the adult sample was 43 (s.d. = 14.3). In the sample, 34% were male and 66% female, 74% were married. Twenty-seven percent had annual incomes of $20,000 or less, 55% $20,000-$50,000, and 9% more than $50,000. Caucasians represented 96% of the sample and minorities 4%. Six percent did not complete high school, 23% did. Thirty-four percent attended some college and an additional 35% attained a bachelors or graduate degree. Fifty-three percent had children currently attending local schools.

Fifty-two percent of the student sample was male and 48% female. Ninety percent were Caucasian and 10% minorities. Sixty-one percent were currently living with both parents, 15% in other two parent (one a step parent) households, 18% lived with one parent and the remainder had another living arrangement. Sixty-six percent of the students described themselves as being active in sports. Thirty-two percent aspired to graduate degrees, 40% to baccalaureate level, 14% to some college, and 13% to high school graduation. Their average grades received for the school year when the study occurred was A/18%, B/40%, C/34%, D/5% and F/2%.

Self Reported Use Levels

A comparison of these use levels between adults and students surfaced significant differences (Chi-Square critical value = 6.25; alpha = .05; d.f. = 3) for cigarettes and other tobacco, marijuana, amphetamines, sniffing stuff, and using two substances on more than one occasion. The cross tabulations for self reported use levels

for each of these variables by age group are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The difference for tobacco is attributed to the fact that adults used the substance in greater proportion at all frequency levels examined. In addition, 66% of the students identified themselves as non-users of tobacco. In the cases of all other drugs, the differences found were attributed to a greater proportion of students responding that they had used the substance at issue "a few times."

No significant differences between adult/student self reported use levels were found for alcohol, cocaine, barbiturates, psychedelics, heroin, or PCP. The cross tabulations for the use levels for each of these drugs by age group are also presented in Table 1. The absence of differences for all solid drugs reflected low frequency of usage (3-12%) by both groups. However, the absence of difference for alcohol reflected adult use at 71%, for some use level, and 70% at some use level by students.

Age of First Experience

While these results were not tested for significant differences in this study, the difference between reported ages of first experiences for adults and youth were stark, in appearance, to the writers. Adults, on the average, reported their first alcohol use at 16, their first alcohol-based intoxication at 17 and

their first regular use of alcohol at 19. Students, on the average, first used alcohol at 11, were first intoxicated at 13, and identified themselves as regular users at 14. The cross tabulations for age of first use by age group are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Students identified their first experimentation with a drug other than alcohol at age 14 and their first high and regular use at the same age. The adult first use pattern also is reported as occurring at the same age, but that age is 18.

The arena for average first experimentation with alcohol has moved from high school to sixth grade; for average first intoxication from 12th grade to 8th grade; for regular use from post-high school to 9th grade, and for experimentation/ intoxication/regular use of other drugs from 12th grade to 9th grade, all in a single generation, in the geographic region where this study was conducted.

Perceived Ease of Obtaining Drugs

Adolescent/adult perception comparisons revealed no significant differences regarding perceived ease of students obtaining heroin and alcohol. For heroin, relative proportional balance between student/adult perceptions of the drug being equally

"hard" and "easy" to obtain by students negated emergence of significant differences. In the case of alcohol, there was strong uniform proportional agreement, between the two groups, upon the ease with which adolescents can obtain the substance.

Significant differences did emerge between adult/student perceptions of the ease with which adolescents can obtain marijuana, uppers, downers, and cocaine. In every case, the ease with which adults perceived that students could obtain the respective substance was much greater than that of the students themselves (Chi Square critical value = 5.41; alpha = .05; d.f. = 1).

Student/Adult Perceptions of Adult Drug Use

High, almost uniform levels of agreement between student and adult perceptions of the extent to which adults use alcohol resulted in no significant difference emerging from that comparison. The cross tabulations for perceptions of adult drug usage by age group are presented in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

Comparisons involving student/adult perceptions of adult use of marijuana, cocaine, and pills did surface significant differences (Chi Square critical value = 6.25; alpha = .05; d.f. = 3). It is here that extremely interesting implications (listed

later) for drug prevention education efforts began to emerge in the cross-perceptions of the two groups. For example, the apparent source of the significant difference regarding perceived adult use of marijuana was based in the fact that adults perceived their peers to use the drug with much greater frequency, and in much higher proportion, than did students. However, in the case of cocaine, students' perceived a much lower proportion of adults using the drug at any frequency, than did adults. In the case of pills, the source of significant difference appeared to be that students perceived a much higher proportion of adults to be non-users than did adults themselves.

These engaging types of cross perceptions emerged in the next set of comparisons, as well. However, the sources of differences are even more intriguing, considering self-reported use levels by both groups.

Student/Adult Perceptions of Student Drug Use

Significant differences between adult and student perceptions of student use of drugs were found for alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and pills (Chi-Square critical value = 6.25; alpha = .05; d.f. = 3). Students (who self-reported a 70% alcohol use level) perceive that most of their peers use alcohol, but most students do not according to adult perceptions (who also perceive it to be extremely easy to obtain). The cross tabulations for perceptions of adolescent drug usage by age group are presented in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

At the same time, students perceive much higher proportions of their peers to be non-users of marijuana, cocaine and pills than do adults. (Remember that the highest self-reported use level of any drug other than alcohol or tobacco, by students, was 12% and that was for "sniffing stuff" and "uppers" both for "a few times.")

Adult/Student Knowledge Levels

Responses on a 12-item true/false test were subjected to two-tailed analysis using the Fisher's Exact Probability statistic at alpha = .05. No significant difference for average scores (adults = 74%; students = 70%) on the whole test was found. The cross tabulations for knowledge about alcohol and drugs and their respective effects by age group are presented in Table 5.

Insert Table 5 about here

However, when the items were divided into an "alcohol" set and "other drugs" set, significant differences did emerge. On the "other drugs" set, the student average score of 78% was found to be significantly different from the adult average of 64% correct.

In the "alcohol" items, the adults' average knowledge score of

80.2% correct was significantly different from the average student score of 63%.

Adult/Student Perceptions of Teacher Drug Use

Significant differences (Chi-Square critical value = 6.25; alpha = .05; d.f. = 3) between the two groups' respective perceptions of teachers as "users" emerged for alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and all other drugs. Again, the apparent sources of differences in perception furnished intellectual grist for the writers, who are involved in drug prevention education efforts, wherein teachers occupy central and critical roles. The cross tabulations for perceptions of teacher drug usage by age group are presented in Table 6.

Insert Table 6 about here

In the case of alcohol, the apparent source of difference lay in the fact that adults perceived "many" teachers to be regular users of the substance in a much greater proportion than did students. Conversely, in the cases of marijuana, cocaine and all other drugs, students perceived a much greater proportion of teachers to be non-users than did adults.

In a short, low-risk, inferential bounce, one might say that adults perceived teachers as using alcohol as they perceived other adults using the substance, but perceived teachers using marijuana, cocaine and other drugs as if (at the same high rate) they were

adolescents!

Conclusions and Implications

1. Excepting cigarettes and tobacco, youth/adult significant differences in self reported drug use appear to reflect youths experimenting with grass, amphetamines and sniffers.
2. It is meaningful that first use, intoxication, regular use, and experimentation occurred 4-5 years earlier for youth than for adults.
3. Students' perceptions of adult drug use is more complimentary to adults than are adults' own perceptions of their peers.
4. Students' perceive that more of their peers are non-users of drugs and alcohol than do adults.
5. Adults perceive drug and alcohol use to be more pervasive among adults and students than do students. Adults' perceptions of use levels, for both groups, are higher than self-reported use, except for alcohol.
6. Students' perceptions of teachers' frequency and density of alcohol and drug use are significantly more favorable than those of adults.
7. Students'/adults' knowledge levels of alcohol/drugs in the field as a whole, aren't significantly different; however, adults' knowledge of alcohol is superior to students' and students' knowledge of other drugs is superior to adults'.
8. Adults perceive that ease of access to drugs, for students, is

much higher than students perceive, for all drugs except heroin and alcohol. Adults' perceptions of ease of obtaining heroin is balanced by students' perceptions of difficulty in doing so.

9. In the region represented by these results, alcohol and tobacco are most widely used, most readily available, and easiest to access, by self report for both groups. The similarity in use levels for alcohol (70% for youth; 71% for adults) however, in combination with adult perceptions of a pervasive drug problem among students for all drugs, may mask and/or hinder community education and treatment efforts of illegal alcohol use by youth.

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Table 1

Self Reported Tobacco Use Levels

	Adolescents	Adults
Never Used	65.5 %	75.4 %
Used a Few Times	16.6 %	5.1 %
Once a Month	2.2 %	0.5 %
Once a Week	3.2 %	1.2 %
At Least Daily	12.5 %	17.8 %

Self Reported Alcohol Use Levels

	Adolescents	Adults
Never Used	30.2 %	29.2 %
Used a Few Times	35.2 %	34.5 %
Once a Month	14.5 %	10.7 %
Once a Week	17.4 %	19.3 %
At Least Daily	2.7 %	6.2 %

Self Reported Marijuana Use Levels

	Adolescents	Adults
Never Used	82.7 %	95.2 %
Used a Few Times	9.8 %	3.0 %
Once a Month	2.5 %	0.4 %
Once a Week	2.7 %	0.9 %
At Least Daily	2.4 %	0.5 %

Table 1 (cont.)

Self Reported Amphetamine Use Levels

	Adolescents	Adults
Never Used	88.8 %	98.4 %
Used a Few Times	7.4 %	1.3 %
Once a Month	1.7 %	0.2 %
Once a Week	1.2 %	0.2 %
At Least Daily	0.9 %	0.0 %

Self Reported Levels for Sniffing Stuff (glue,paint,gasoline,etc.)

	Adolescents	Adults
Never Used	88.6 %	99.5 %
Used a Few Times	9.3 %	0.5 %
Once a Month	0.8 %	0.0 %
Once a Week	0.5 %	0.0 %
At Least Daily	0.9 %	0.0 %

Table 2

Median Age of Use and Initial "Highs" With Alcohol and Other Drugs

	Adolescents	Adults
First Tried Alcohol	11	16
First Intoxicated with Alcohol	13	17
Regular Use of Alcohol	14	19
First Tried Other Drug	14	18
First "High" on Other Drug	14	18
Regular Use of Other Drug	14	18

Table 3

Significant Perceptual Differences Regarding Adult Drug Use

	Perceptions of Adolescents	Perceptions of Adults
Alcohol	Same high use levels	Same high use levels
Marijuana	Lower adult use	Higher adult use
Cocaine	More adult nonusers	Fewer adult nonusers
Pills	More adult nonusers	Fewer adult nonusers

Table 4

Significant Perceptual Differences Regarding Adolescent Drug Use

	Perceptions of Adolescents	Perceptions of Adults
Alcohol	Most students use	Fewer students use
Marijuana	More student nonusers	Fewer students nonusers
Cocaine	More student nonusers	Fewer students nonusers
Pills	More student nonusers	Fewer students nonusers

Table 5

Percent Correct Knowledge of Drugs and Their Effects

	Alcohol	Marijuana and Other Drugs
Adult Respondents	80.2 %	62.0 %
Adolescent Respondents	63.0 %	75.0 %

Table 6

Significant Perceptual Differences Regarding Teacher Drug Use

	Perceptions of Adolescents	Perceptions of Adults
Alcohol	Fewer teachers use	More teachers use
Marijuana	More teacher nonusers	Fewer teacher nonusers
Cocaine	More teacher nonusers	Fewer teacher nonusers
Pills	More teacher nonusers	Fewer teacher nonusers